

The Almost Magic Toe

By Jack Ritchie

NOTE: This is the original version of the story printed in Young Catholic Messenger. The editor of that magazine significantly shortened the story on publication. Therefore, this is the version that should be used for reprints.

The new men looked just about average, I guess. I mean everybody looks average until you get to know him. Except for this one big kid. He was about four inches taller than anybody else — even us seniors — and he weighed maybe thirty pounds more.

Coach Nelson's eyes lit up. "What's your name?"

"James Hackett, sir."

"I haven't seen you around, Hackett. Freshman?"

"No, sir. I'm a senior."

That put out about three-quarters of the light in Nelson's eyes, but then he sort of pulled himself together, figuring, "Oh, well, at least we've got him for one year."

"I transferred from Iron River High," Hackett said. "My parents moved down here."

The coach looked like he was thinking about Iron River High and trying to place it.

Hackett helped him. "It's up north, sir. Near the state line."

The coach nodded as though he had it pinpointed now, but I bet myself that he never heard of it before either. "What position did you play?"

"I'll try anything, sir."

The coach seemed to be wondering about Hackett now. "Let me put it this way, Hackett. What position did you play at Iron River?"

"I didn't play football, sir. We didn't have a football team. You see, Iron River is the smallest high school in the state. Thirty-eight pupils. My junior class was only nine

and six of those were girls."

We all thought about the tragedy of a thing like that.

The coach sighed. "Well, we'll see if we can fit you in any place."

I didn't think the coach would put him in the line. We've got the finest line in the state — defensively, at least — and there's no sense in tampering with something like that.

With Hackett's size, I thought he'd be a cinch for fullback. And the team really needed a fullback.

As a matter of fact, according to Milton Elderidge, the sports editor of the school paper, what the team really needs is a fullback, a right half back, a left half back, and a quarterback.

I'm the quarterback.

Looking at the records — part of them, at least — we don't have such a bad team. Last season only twenty-eight points were scored against us.

But the thing is that our record for the seven games was no wins, two ties, and five losses.

Now that isn't too hard to explain. You see, we didn't score a touchdown all last season. Not even a field goal. We lost two games by the score of 7 to 0, two games 6 to 0, and one on 2 to 0. That last one was when I got tackled in my own end zone. And those two tie games ended 0 to 0.

We move pretty good from the kick-off on. As a matter of fact we averaged 162 yards rushing per game. And you might not believe it, but I completed 64% of my passes to lead the league last year.

We do fine, just fine, and everything *clicks*, until we get inside our opponent's fifteen yard line. Then everything seems to go wrong.

I guess the worst time was that Monitor game last year. We got the ball down to the

one yard line and first down. Four plays later we were still there. What really hurts is that the Monitor team goofed and had only ten men on the field for all four plays.

Milt Elderidge says we're a team with a lot of color. All of it gray.

What makes him so bitter?

The coach finished signing us up and handed out the play books. The new men stayed to be fitted with suits and gear and the rest of us went home.

The next afternoon, we did a few exercises to loosen up, ran around the field a couple of times, and then the coach blew his whistle.

He put the ball on the forty yard stripe. "All right, everybody but the first and second teams off the field. Hackett, we'll try you at fullback."

He turned to me. "Conway, I want you to give the ball to Hackett. Let's see what he can do."

I called the first team into a huddle. "Hackett, we'll try a number 3-A-3 first. A plain handoff and you drive between right tackle and right guard."

He nodded. "I got it."

Out team works from the T, and I took the ball direct from under the center, heeled back, turned, and slipped the ball to Hackett as he came by.

Then I stepped out of the way to watch the play. On this one there isn't much else for the quarterback to do except to watch for a fumble.

Our right guard, Henning, and our right tackle, Leoni, wedged open a nice lane.

That ought to be good for about seven or eight yards, I thought.

The only trouble was that by the time Hackett got there, a lot of people had gotten off the turf and were waiting to meet him. He lost about a yard.

Back in the huddle, I said, "That was a nice hole they made for you, Hackett, but you've got to hustle."

He looked a little offended. "But I *did* hustle."

"We'll try 3-B-3," I said. "Same thing as the last one, only through the left side."

This time when I shoveled the ball to Hackett and stepped out of the way, I watched him instead of the line.

For a few seconds, I had a queer feeling. It looked to me like I was watching something in slow motion. But I snapped out of it when I realized that the only person really in slow motion was Hackett.

It took five men to bring him down, but he still lost two yards.

I tried Hackett again in a straight plunge. He lost a yard. And then, just for kicks, I tried a reverse. He lost six.

The coach called me to the sidelines. "Well?"

I cleared my throat. "He's a little slow on his feet."

The coach smiled like it hurt. "Slow? He's the slowest human being I've seen in twenty years of coaching."

"Well," I said, trying to defend Hackett some, "It takes about four or five men to bring him down."

Coach Nelson walked out onto the field. "Hackett, why didn't you tell me you were that slow?"

Hackett shifted uneasily. "I didn't know I was that slow. I never played football before and so I never had anybody to compare myself with."

It was pretty quiet on the field now, with everybody standing there and being sad with the coach. And it was sad. Here was Hackett, so big and strong, and all that mule-power wasted because he couldn't put one foot in front of the other before you could count to ten.

Hackett broke the silence. "I can pass, sir."

That didn't make much of a dent in the coach's gloom. "We need another passer like we need a hole in our heads. We've got

Conway and he's the best in the league. And if anything should happen to him, we got Turley and Yates to take his place and they're almost as good."

It was quiet again and then Hackett said, "I can kick, sir."

The coach wasn't impressed. "We got Raden to do the kicking and he's better than average."

Hackett looked just about as disconsolate as anybody I'd ever seen and maybe that was why the coach finally sighed and said, "All right. What have we got to lose? Let's see you kick."

Hackett brightened. "Where to, sir?"

The coach shrugged and pointed. "Over towards those goal posts. Try to hit one of them."

They were about fifty yards down wind.

"Which one, sir?" Hackett asked.

The coach looked at him a little sharp. "Hit the right side one." Then he smiled something like a shark. "Make it four feet ten and three-quarters of an inch above the ground."

Hackett squinted down the field, took his step, and his foot connected.

Right away, just from the sound of the contact, you could tell the thing was going to go the distance. We watched it rise, arch, and come down.

It hit the right hand goal post about seven or eight feet off the ground.

Hackett frowned. "I underestimated the wind at my back, sir."

The coach looked at him for a couple of seconds, trying to figure whether he had a wise guy here or not. Then he handed Hackett another football. "Do that again."

Hackett did.

I wouldn't say that the ball hit that goal post exactly four feet ten and three-quarters inches above the ground, but on the other hand I wouldn't like to bet against it.

The coach didn't say a word. He just handed Hackett another football.

Hackett kicked six more times — and hit that goal post six times. And then the coach had me trotting up and down the sidelines laying down a handkerchief for Hackett to aim at.

Out of about twenty kicks, Hackett missed the handkerchief only twice — and both those times the distance was over sixty yards — and even then he didn't miss by more than a foot.

We quit practice when it got too dark to see anything but the smile on coach's face. He patted Hackett's shoulder. "Take good care of that foot, boy. Don't kick rocks or anything heavy."

It didn't take much imagination to figure out how much Hackett was going to mean to the team.

It was this way. We had the best defensive team in the conference last year and we allowed an average of only four points per game. And this year we had practically the same line from end to end.

Even if we *couldn't* push the ball over the goal line, we wouldn't *have* to. All we needed was to get the ball near our opponent's forty yard line. From that distance we could almost positively count on Hackett to get us three points with a field goal. And we ought to get that close seven or eight times a game.

Even if we didn't move the ball that far, Hackett would easily punt us out of trouble. And there'd be no kick-off returns to worry about either. Hackett could boot the ball clear over the end zone for an automatic touchback.

All in all, I think everybody was just as happy about Hackett as Coach Nelson.

During the week, Hackett did nothing at practice but kick. No blocking, no running, no passing. When we scrimmaged, he'd be put in just for the one play that called for booting the ball and I'll tell you he was really impressive.

The school band uses the field for drill

formations in the period before we get on the field for our own practice, and Milton Elderidge took to staying to watch the team at work.

Elderidge is not only the sports editor, but he also plays trombone in the band. As a matter of fact, he's a music major.

The day before our first game of the season with Jefferson, he came over to me while I was taking a breather on the bench.

His lips were thin. "I suppose you expect to win all your games with field goals?"

"What's wrong with that?"

He shrugged. "I thought you might have more pride."

"What's pride got to do with it?"

He tested the slide of his trombone a couple of times. "If I was on an offensive team that had no offense, it would kind of bother me."

"Well don't let it keep you awake nights, you're not on the team."

Hackett stopped his kicking practice and came to the bench. He took off his helmet, wiped his forehead, and pointed to the canvas-covered mound near the fifty yard line. "What's that?"

Elderidge was still hanging around. "That's out cannon. We fire a blank every time the team scores a touchdown." He monkeyed with the trombone again. "It hasn't been fired in more than a year. The barrel's probably rusty."

I glared at him. "It's not."

"How do you know?"

"Because I looked." And then I got red in the face. The thing was that I'd been wondering myself if that barrel was rusty and so I'd sneaked a look. But I didn't feel too good getting tricked into admitting it.

Hackett put his helmet back on. "Well, I don't think it'll have a chance to get rusty this season."

Elderidge still looked gloomy. "The cannon isn't fired for field goals, Hackett. Only touchdowns. It's a school tradition."

Hackett watched him walk away. "What's with him?"

"You got me. I thought he was riding us only because we weren't winning, but now that we got all the chance in the world of having our best season, he still doesn't seem happy about it."

That Saturday afternoon we met Jefferson High.

Prentiss, our left half, took the opening kick-off on the nine and brought it back to the thirty-one before he was downed.

On the first play from scrimmage, I faded back and tossed one to Wittich, the left end. He pulled it in on the Jefferson forty-eight and got nailed in his tracks. But it was a first down.

I sent Franks, the fullback, on a straight smash through the middle and he picked up four. On second down, Prentiss tried left end and got four more. On third and two, I fired a short pass to Wittich, but he let it slip in and out of his fingers.

It was fourth and two on the Jefferson forty and Hackett came trotting out onto the field.

As we shifted into our field goal formation, I don't think there was a man on the Jefferson team who wasn't positive that we were going to fake. You just don't try for field goals from that distance — unless you happen to have somebody like Hackett up your sleeve.

When Hackett swung his leg, the ball rose and I could hear the oh's and ah's and finally the gasp from the crowd when it sailed true between the uprights.

The score stood at 3 to 0 in our favor.

On the kick-off, Hackett put the ball over the end zone and Jefferson took over on its own twenty.

Our line held, and after a long punt, we brought the ball back to the Jefferson forty-nine. From there we picked up the first two downs, but once again we stalled. This time on the twenty-four.

The field goal try was easy, for Hackett at least, and raised the score, 6 to 0.

By the time sixty minutes of playing time were over, we were ahead 24 to 0. Hackett had kicked eight field goals to set a conference record. He had had to punt only twice — when we couldn't move the ball within field goal distance, even for Hackett — but each time he put the ball out of bounds inside the Jefferson ten yard line.

Of course we were all pretty hilarious about winning our first game in more than a year, but as we trotted toward the ramp down to our dressing room, I happened to glance at the school band and saw one exception. Elderidge looked gloomier than a rain cloud.

I just couldn't figure him out.

When the school paper came out on Wednesday, I read Elderidge's account of the game. He had a lot of praise for Hackett and plenty more for our defensive unit, but the last line of his article really straightened me. "The offensive platoon appeared on the field at regular intervals — mostly to keep the Jefferson players from feeling lonely."

That Saturday we took Monitor 21 to 0. The week after Roosevelt went down 18 to 6, and next we clobbered Delaven Tech, 27 to 0. Hackett's toe accounted for all of our points.

In his sports column, Elderidge never did let up on our offensive unit.

At practice before the Yates game, I noticed Hackett go over to the cannon at the fifty yard line. He took the canvas off one end and looked down the barrel.

I don't know why, but I felt a little irritated. I went over and joined him.

He pointed down the barrel. "Rust."

I looked to and got a bit warm. "Not much." I put my arm in the barrel and rubbed at the spot with my sleeve. "There. It's gone now."

Hackett looked thoughtful. "Have you

ever heard it fired?"

My face got red. "Sure. When I was a sophomore on the third team."

When we walked back out on the field, I noticed that Elderidge had been watching us. There was a thin smile on his face, and I guess my face got even redder.

That Saturday we took on Rutherford High, and with less than one minute to go, we were ahead 18 to 7, and had third down and eight on our opponent's thirteen.

I faded back with the ball and flipped to Wittich on the sideline. He took the ball just in bounds and about two yards beyond the line of scrimmage.

It looked like he'd make the first down, or maybe — if he drove — he might even....

But Wittich whirled and recrossed the scrimmage line. He ran behind it to a point about midway between the sidelines and then tried to drive straight ahead like a fullback.

He lost two yards.

Fourth and ten and Hackett trotted out onto the field.

He stared at Wittich for about ten seconds. "Why did you do that? You should have got the first down if you'd gone straight ahead when you caught the ball. Maybe even a touchdown."

Wittich shifted a little. "But suppose I didn't make the first down? We'd have had the ball right near the sidelines on fourth down. Even if the referee replaced it farther in, you would have had an almost impossible kicking angle."

Hackett's eyes seemed to flicker. "And so you sacrificed a first down — maybe a touchdown — just so that I would have a better kicking position?"

Wittich spoke defensively. "Why not? A positive three points is better than a maybe six."

We went into formation and I took the snap from center. I placed the ball and Hackett booted.

Another three points, I thought. That will make it 21 to 7.

But I thought a little too fast. The ball slewed off to the left and the kick was no good.

Hackett blinked and his mouth dropped. He couldn't quite believe it and I guess none of us could either.

I patted him on the shoulder. "Never mind, Jim. None of us is perfect."

The game ended 18 to 7.

When we trotted off the field, I looked toward the band. Elderidge was glaring and I think most of it was aimed at Wittich.

During practice the next week, I noticed that a lot of Hackett's kicks were going to the left, or to the right of the goal posts.

I began to get a cold feeling. Was he getting stale or falling into a slump?

During a breather, I walked over to the cannon and looked down the barrel. The rust spot was a lot bigger. It took five minutes of rubbing with my sleeve before it disappeared.

On Thursday, after practice, I was almost all the way home when I remembered that I'd left my history book in my locker at the gym. We had an exam scheduled for the next day and I thought I'd better go back and get it.

There was a quarter moon in the sky as I got to the school and I noticed somebody walking across the practice field. He seemed to be carrying a bucket.

At the cannon, he stopped and lifted off the canvas. He tilted the bucket and poured something down the barrel.

I trotted across the field. "What in the world are you doing?"

It was Elderidge and he dropped the bucket. I thought at first that he would run, but then he seemed to change his mind.

I repeated the question. "What are you doing?"

"I'm pouring water down the barrel of the cannon," he said. "That's what I'm

doing."

I blinked. "Water?"

"Of course, water," he snapped. "How else can I make the barrel rust?"

"Rust? But why?"

He folded his arms. "I thought I might shame the offensive team into finally scoring a touchdown."

I shook my head slowly. "Elderidge, I just can't figure you. Isn't it enough that we *win* each week?"

"No," he declared firmly. "That *isn't* enough. You've got to score at least *one* touchdown. Just *one*."

"But why?"

He took a deep breath. "The school has a victory song, a fight song, and all kinds of other songs. But it doesn't have a *touchdown* song — a *special* piece that the band could play every time the team scored a touchdown."

He sighed. "And so *two* years ago, I remedied that situation and composed one. It's called *Touchdown for Central High*."

I rubbed my jaw. "I don't think I ever heard of it."

His voice squeaked angrily. "Of course you've never heard of it! You've never scored a touchdown. Nobody but the band ever heard it and that was in practice. For almost *two* years we've been waiting to play it, but no touchdown." He sounded as though he wanted to cry. "My parents have been to every game for *two* years waiting for the premier of my composition. And they *hate* football."

For a while I really didn't know what to say to cheer him up, but then an inspiration came to me. "Why don't you just change the title to *A Field Goal for Central High*?"

He glared at me. "Never. It's a matter of principle. And besides that, it isn't that simple. The song has four verses and almost every line deals with touchdowns. I'd have to recall every sheet of music from the band."

He stared up at the sky for ten seconds, as though he were accusing it of something, and then he picked up the bucket and walked away.

On Saturday we were hosts to the Merris Falls Trojans.

They won the toss and elected to receive. Hackett boomed the kick-off over the end zone — like usual — and the Trojans took over on their own twenty.

We had figured them for the T, but they came out single wing, and they moved the ball fairly well, getting three first downs in a row.

And then on second down and six on our twenty-seven, our defensive team suddenly found itself looking at the T formation. Before it could adjust, the Trojan quarterback fired a long looper into the corner of the end zone where a Merris Falls waited and hauled it in.

The point after was missed and the score remained 6 to 0.

During the first half, we never managed to get the ball downfield far enough for field goal position, but Hackett had the chance to boom some nice long punts.

When we trotted out onto the field for the second half, we weren't particularly worried. The Trojan defense was playing way over its head and that couldn't last. The records showed that.

And it seemed like a cinch for us to move the ball into field goal territory at least a half a dozen times in the next two quarters.

Olson, our right half, took the kick-off all the way down to the Merris Falls nineteen before he was caught.

A play through the center of the line got us even, but on an end run on second down, Prentiss was nailed near the sidelines for a loss of two. The referee paced the distance from the sideline and decided that the ball could remain where it was.

On third and five, I faded back. It was an option play — I could either pass or run.

The blocking in front of me held and I had time to see Wittich in the end zone without a Trojan near him.

I cocked my arm.

And then in the next second or two, a lot of things flashed through my head.

Suppose Wittich dropped the ball? And if he *did* drop it, we'd have fourth down with the ball in an awkward position for Hackett's field goal try.

Wittich's words in the Rutherford High game came back to me. "A *positive* three points is better than a *maybe* six."

I tucked the ball under my arm and angled towards my left. I was caught and lost four yards, but that didn't matter. We had the ball squarely in front of the goal posts.

When Hackett came into the huddle, he spoke to me. "Wittich was in the clear. Didn't you see him?"

I explained the strategy of what I'd done and expected him to nod approvingly, but he didn't. He just frowned.

On the next play, I propped up the ball and Hackett stepped into it.

I looked up confidently, but my mouth dropped when I saw the ball veer off to the left.

The official signaled that the kick was no good.

Hackett didn't say anything as he walked off the field.

Merris Falls took over on its own fourteen. Three plays got the Trojans nothing and they were forced to punt.

Prentiss brought the kick back to the Merris forty-five. We picked up one first down, and then on the next sequence of plays I kept the calls through the center of the line or off tackle.

We went no place and had fourth and six on the Merris twenty-three. But the ball lay in front of the goal posts again and that was what I'd been aiming for.

Hackett came in. "Conway, their defense

was pulled in on every one of those last three plays. They were expecting you to try the line. Why didn't you sweep wide or go for a pass?"

I felt my ears getting red. "*I'm* the quarterback on this team and *I* call the plays."

This time Hackett's try for the field goal went way off to the left.

I began to get a cold feeling, but I patted him on the shoulder as he went to the sidelines.

Once more in the third quarter, and twice during the fourth, Hackett missed field goals. All of them were for pretty long distances, I'll admit, but still I began to wonder if he'd lost his touch.

The clock ticked on and there were only six minutes to play when we got another fourth down on the Merris sixteen. True in front of the goal posts.

I was sweating now. Hackett had to make this one. And we ought to get a hold of the ball once more. With a little luck we'd at least get a tie.

When Hackett came in he called for a time out.

He looked us over. "This time we're going to fake the kick."

I was the first one who managed to recover enough to speak. "Fake?"

He nodded. "That's what Coach Nelson wants." And then he paused. "I talked him into it."

I frowned. "Is there something wrong with your foot?"

"No," he said evenly. "There's nothing wrong with my foot. But there's *plenty* wrong with this team."

We stared at him.

He went on. "Last year this team didn't score a single touchdown. That's a freak, but it could happen. But the point is that last year you were *trying*."

His eyes went from face to face. "But this year you *haven't* been trying. Even the

fans in the stands know that. All you want to do is get the ball in a position so that I can kick a field goal. When you've done that you think you your job's finished. But there's more to a team than just one man. And this team — as far as the offense goes, is really a *one* man team. And *I'm* that man."

We didn't say anything.

"You're not playing a hundred yards of football field and you're not playing a hundred percent of what you *can* do. You're playing about sixty yards of field and about sixty percent of your effort. All you're interested in is keeping the ball in front of the goal posts."

A sudden suspicion crossed my mind. "Hackett, did you miss those kicks on purpose?"

"No. I have my bad days too and this looks like one of them." He almost seemed to glare at us. "What's the matter, are you *afraid* to score a touchdown?"

Maybe that stung more than anything else he said.

"All right," I snapped. "Let's get on with the play."

The ball came back to where I crouched on one knee, but this time I didn't place it. I went back and to my right with the ball. Hackett moved in front of me for any blocking that might have to be done.

The play caught the Merris team flatfooted and I had the choice of three open receivers in the end zone. I picked Wittich and he took the pass without any trouble.

Central High had scored its first touchdown in almost two years!

I think that must have caught the spectators by surprise too, because for about five seconds, there was absolute silence from the stands.

And then the crowd exploded into the loudest roar I'd ever heard in my life. For all I knew maybe even some Merris fans were cheering us. The noise sounded big enough for that.

Wittich got plenty of pounding on the back from all of us and Hackett probably got even more. I don't know how long the celebration might have lasted, but the officials reminded us that we still had to try for the extra point, and besides that, there were over five minutes left to play.

Before we could get settled down, we were penalized five yards for delaying the game. But that didn't matter, Hackett made the point after and we led, 7 to 6.

As that went up on the scoreboard, I suddenly realized that something was missing.

I hadn't heard the cannon fired.

That bothered me so much I called time out and trotted over to where Ted Volke stood behind the gun. It was his job to fire it.

"How come I didn't hear any shot?" I demanded.

He flushed. "I lost the key to the locker where the blanks are kept." And then he got even redder. "That was three weeks ago, but I never thought I'd really need any ammunition. Especially not this season."

And now I realized something else bothered me. The band had played after the touchdown, but it had been an old school fight song.

What had happened to Elderidge's *Touchdown for Central High?*

I looked toward the band. Elderidge sat

there huddled around his trombone and he looked about as dejected as anybody I'd ever seen in my life.

Maybe it was telepathy, but I knew what had happened.

He had taken my advice, done a lot of work, and changed his song to *Field Goal for Central High*.

But that wasn't all. Like the officials said, the game wasn't over yet. On their first play from scrimmage, the Merris right half broke through our line and scampered eight yards for a touchdown.

That's the way the game ended. 13 to 7, in favor of Merris.

The next week we played our last game of the season. We beat Northeast High by a score of 20 to 0 and picked up the conference title.

This time I heard the cannon. Twice.

Also I finally heard Elderidge's song.

Twice when Hackett kicked field goals and twice when we scored touchdowns.

I asked Elderidge about that after the game.

He grinned from ear to ear. "I threw away all the lyrics and changed the tempo of the piece to a march. The title is now *Touchdown or Field Goal for Central High*."

I kind of like that.

It rings.

